

# Biscayne Bound

Concession boats dock at the harbor in front of the Dante Fascell Visitor Center at Convoy Point.

*Strand yourself on an unhitched island for the ultimate getaway*

by **Chelle Koster Walton**

**Y**ou've gotta love a hiking trail named Spite Highway. Well, you don't *have* to, but I did, once I heard the story.

The seven-mile, 225-foot-wide swath down the middle of Elliott Key was cleared by developers many years ago, with the intent to bridge the dot-dash islands of Biscayne National Park with Dade County mainland and the Florida Keys. The U.S. government stepped in during the 1960s, however, to save the islands, thus exacting its spite against slash-and-build greed. Today the highway is a foot trail into a tropical hardwood hammock. Yes! Score one for the environment.

Biscayne National Park—the vast, mostly underwater (95 percent of its 173,000 acres) refuge that geographically kicks off the Florida Keys and the third longest stretch of coral reef in the world—scores way more than a point, actually. For outdoor enthusiasts, it's got it all. Well, except for snow skiing. There's boating, kayaking, snorkeling, scuba diving, hiking, wilderness island camping, and even a healthy slice of history, dating back to the Tequesta Indians. Biscayne is not for the convenience adventurer, however. It takes some effort to enjoy what's best about the park, namely what's under and out on the water.

First, you have to find it. Tucked into Biscayne Bay along Homestead back roads, Dante Fascell Visitor Center at Convoy Point introduces you to what lies hidden from sweeping views of mangrove islands and water, water everywhere. Artistically designed exhibits represent the different maritime habitats from mangroves and muddy shallows to coral reefs. In the auditorium, rotating exhibits show the Biscayne-related art of local painters, and videos are aired upon request.

Most importantly, the Visitor Center is the departure point for the park's various tours and recreational activities. If you are a casual adventurer, opt for the

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three-hour glass-bottom boat tour. Besides looking down at the park's vibrant coral reefs, you get a ranger's feel-and-touch lesson on the different sorts of mangroves, sponges, and corals, using props that include a "polyp puppet" to illustrate how reefs are formed.

A little more daring? Don mask and snorkel (and wet suit if it's winter) to immerse yourself in the reef experience. The park's concession rents it all. We saw lobsters, a spotted yellow sting ray, angelfish, blue tangs, sergeant majors, and fish of many stripes—and spots—during our December visit.

The boat tours run year-round, but if the water is too rough, the tour heads to Boca Chita Island rather than the outer coral reefs. Once a private island where Mark Honeywell, of thermostat fame, entertained the illustrious with elephant circuses and an ornamental lighthouse (which you can climb on the ranger's tour), it's now part of the park and, as a consolation prize to the reefs, it does okay. (Rangers also conduct the Boca Chita tour on certain Sundays in season.) From the lighthouse, Miami looms in the distance like a mirage of reality in a sea of escape.

You can camp overnight on Boca Chita or on nearby Elliott Key, which is larger and more wooded. We opted for Elliott Key and made arrangements

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**From left to right: A historic marker at Boca Chita tells about Mark Honeywell's reign on the island; some of the local wildlife on Boca Chita; Miami boaters dock at the harbor at Boca Chita.**

with the glass-bottom snorkel boat to drop us off. That's the only way to get to the islands, two of more than 44 keys that make up the park. That, or by private boat, which a lot of Miamians do, docking in the harbor and either sleeping aboard or, like us, setting up a tent.

If you arrive by park concession boat, pack lightly. The boat dock is a long distance (when you're carrying a lot of gear) from camping areas. Use backpacks and wheeled coolers and containers. You are required to carry out all of your trash.

If it's the least bit warm, find a spot with a good breeze to deter no-see-ums. Bring along your bug juice of choice. If it's cold, select a protected spot to stay warm. Make sure food is raccoon-proof.

Facilities are limited to picnic tables, grills, flush toilets, cold showers, and usually drinking water. Bring bottled water in case the system loses power. (Boca Chita has no fresh water, sinks, or showers.)

Pack a fishing pole, because Elliott Key is exactly the kind of place where you can kick back with nothing else to do but wait for a nibble. You can venture out into the mangroves and grass flats

around the island to find whatever marine creatures are lurking. Or you can hike the mile loop that crosses Spite Highway and takes you to the ocean.

I recommend a one-night stay the first time out; test your ability to function totally cut off—by water, space, and time it seems—from the plugged-in world. At night Elliott Key becomes sea-breeze quiet. With no lights or noise to interfere, you can gaze at the stars and the distant glow of Miami while a chorus of insects and frogs chant, croak, and creak.

The next afternoon, the snorkel boat can pick you up on its way back to Convoy Point. (Camping transportation is only available November through May, and believe me, you don't want to attempt it the rest of the year.)

The very adventurous may want to embark on a weekend scuba diving voyage, if you're already certified. Or, back at the visitor center, you can rent a canoe or kayak to paddle around the bay and picnic on the grounds. If you're a windsurfer with your own equipment, take advantage of the stiff breezes.

During season, rangers deliver informative talks on the park's endangered creatures, including sea turtles

and the Shaus' swallowtail butterfly, which holds the rare distinction of being able to fly backwards. Ironically, the species has made a comeback thanks to Hurricane Andrew in 1992. By obliterating Boca Chita's Australian pines, old Andy made the island more hospitable for the indigenous insect. Score one more for the environment! 🦋

*Travel Editor Chelle Koster Walton is author of The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's Gulf Coast and contributes to The Miami Herald, National Geographic Traveler, Away.com, and other local and national publications.*

## If You Go

**Biscayne National Park**  
305-230-7275  
[www.nps.gov/bisc](http://www.nps.gov/bisc)  
**Biscayne National Underwater Park concessions**  
305-230-1100  
[divebiscayne@bellsouth.net](mailto:divebiscayne@bellsouth.net)